

Italy sells rice to the Chinese

Italy's culinary prowess has reached the point where it is to start exporting rice to China (Tom Kington writes).

"It makes you laugh because it's a bit like going to the North Pole to sell icicles," **Gian Marco Centinaio**, the Italian agriculture minister, told the annual congress of Italian chefs in Catania. "But Chinese consumers now see Italian food as of guaranteed quality."

The Chinese want Italian risotto rice, which they cannot get at home, even though China is the world's biggest producer of rice, the minister said. The short grain variety, which can absorb up to five times its weight in liquid, is perfect for producing creamy, sticky risotto when cooked with butter, stock and parmesan cheese. The dish combines perfectly with shavings of Italian white truffle, an expensive export also phenomenally popular with affluent Chinese. Last year an 850g truffle was auctioned for €85,000 to an anonymous buyer in Hong Kong.

Mr **Centinaio** told the gathering of more than 1,000 chefs that the deal to export rice was a result of trade ties bolstered by Italy's decision to sign up to Beijing's Belt and Road project, which could

attract investment to Italian ports.

The US, which sees Belt and Road as a Chinese plot to increase its strategic influence, has objected to the Italian move.

Mr **Centinaio** said that feeding risotto to the Chinese made it worth it. "My aim is to allow our producers to go to China with their head held high with a product that the Chinese government believes is excellent," he added.

Rice came to Italy in or around the 14th century, possibly from India, and cultivation took off in the Po Valley, where Leonardo da Vinci designed drains for marshland to make way for rice fields.

The minister's visit to Catania coincided with a series of culinary events and the annual conference of the Italian Federation of Chefs which included an opera night for hundreds of chefs at the city's Massimo Bellini theatre. While in town, delegates also set up tables in a local park to cook up specialities for locals.

L'Italia vende il riso ai cinesi

